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Remove first-time voter hurdle - Lawmakers should support bill that makes voting simpler for college students and others away from home**Grand Rapids Press, The (MI) - Thursday, April 9, 2009****Author: The Grand Rapids Press**

Lawmakers should support a House bill that would make it easier for college students and other first-time voters away from their home precincts to cast a ballot. Voting is the primary means available for people to participate in the democratic process -- the decision-making of their community, state and nation. Legislators who respect and believe in that process must be committed to eliminating obstacles that can turn away voters.

Under Michigan law, new voters must register to vote before an election at the office of the local clerk in the community where they live, or at a designated registration site. If first-time voters register by mail, they must show up in person to vote or to request an absentee ballot to vote in their first election.

This means young people away at college who did not register in person before leaving for school might be unable to vote, if they cannot get back home on Election Day. That can be a challenge for some students who don't have the resources or the time between their studies, exams, or jobs to make a special trip back home to fulfill requirements. Only three other states -- Illinois, Tennessee and Nevada -- have this stipulation. This rule is usually a hardship associated with college students, but obviously other first-time voters can be impacted as well.

Rep. Thomas Pearce, R-Rockford, has again introduced common sense legislation that would satisfy the state requirement. Under his measure, a person who registered to vote by mail could present a valid form of identification to any county, city or township clerk in the state. That clerk would provide notification that the person had satisfied the requirement to vote in person and the identification requirement of the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Upon receipt of the notice, the voter's home clerk would be required to update the information in the qualified voter file.

This well-reasoned legislation was co-sponsored by Reps. David Agema, R-Grandville, Kevin Green, R-Wyoming and David Hildenbrand, R-Lowell. The bill was referred to the House Ethics and Elections Committee. Mr. Pearce's fellow committee members should expedite approval of this workable solution to a longtime challenge for young voters.

Mr. Pearce introduced this bill last year but it stalled in the Senate. Voter legislation too often is a partisan issue, and both partisan Democrats and Republicans are guilty of pushing or opposing measures, based on which party is likely to benefit more at the polls. Mr. Pearce and his co-sponsors should be commended for being motivated by good public policy. Their fellow lawmakers should let that be their guide as well, for this and other needed voter access measures such as no reason absentee ballots.

Lawmakers should also take into account Mr. Pearce's measure has the support of both the Michigan Association of County Clerks and Michigan Association of Municipal Clerks. There should be no obstacles for eligible voters. The Legislature should remove this limiting, geographic challenge.

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